

Judgment

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, March 10th, 2019

Jesus said, “Do not judge according to the appearance, *but judge with just judgment*” (John 7:24).

Last week we considered the topic of mercy, including the fact that sometimes true mercy can seem harsh because it contradicts what we want, or think we want. So today we will be considering the topic of judgment, and how that works in conjunction with mercy. Next Sunday we’ll be talking about the *Last Judgment* predicted in the Word.

As you heard in our third lesson this morning,

“... there are two things which constitute the order of the universal heaven, and thence in the universe, namely, Good and Truth. Good is the essential of order, all the things of which are mercies. Truth is the secondary of order, all the things of which are truths. The Divine good adjudges all to heaven, but the Divine truth condemns all to hell; and therefore unless the Lord’s Mercy, which is of good, were eternal, all men, however many, would be condemned” (AC 2258:2).

This passage in context makes it clear that judgment is based on truth, and that truth without mercy in human life condemns everyone. But this in no way means that judgment OR truth is itself a problem: it’s only hurtful to us when we’re out of order and even then, as the passage says, in the Lord’s case it is always tempered with mercy.

One reason for considering the topic of judgment again today is that unfortunately the very word in our public discourse has come to mean almost entirely bad things. “Don’t judge!” or “Don’t be judgmental” has become a sort of mantra for many, along with other “hateful” words like discriminate or discrimination. Boy! If you do any of these things in modern American society you could be considered hopelessly arrogant or prejudiced, if not racist or misogynist, depending on the context. Even the word, distinctiveness, which involves judgment, seems to have a negative connotation these days for many people.

Ironically, at the same time we regularly hear in the news about people who have experienced some crime or other outrage who demand *justice*. But of course what they really want is not justice, as such, but a *judgment* against the perpetrators, it’s just that the word, justice, which actually means mercy, has a much nicer connotation and seems reasonable in light of the offense. After all, when someone causes suffering is it not right that he (or she) should suffer as a result?

Well, yes, maybe. There IS a spiritual law of consequences (some religions call it karma) and it’s well developed representatively in the Old Testament law of retaliation, which the teachings for the New Church fully explain. For now, though, let’s just acknowledge that consequences, including punishments for bad behavior are obviously necessary and important, not only for the maintenance of order in society but for the reformation of those who offend. *What IS wrong, however, is the desire for revenge*, and that’s where true justice comes in. It’s not about getting even; it’s not about punishment for punishment’s sake. *That’s a prescription for life in hell*, and even there the Lord only allows spirits to punish one another for the sake of maintaining outward order, even though it is the delight of their lives to inflict punishment. All the judgments that

lead to *just* punishment are purely about discouraging bad behavior and teaching folks to do what is good. And there are at least three reasons why this can only be accomplished when judgment is administered with mercy:

1. People are naturally defensive. They need to feel loved, or at least respected at some level or they will not respond to correction. The human will always leads the understanding and it *will not be compelled* by the understanding, though it can be subordinated and *re-placed* by a new will *in the understanding*, which is what we call conscience. So, when we feel unjustly (unfairly or unkindly) judged we will naturally recoil and resist the imposition of any rule or discipline.
2. On the other hand, when mercy is applied indiscriminately, without judgment, although the will of the one being coddled may be delighted, the understanding usually is not fooled, and so a sort of dissonance¹ occurs in which the mind is basically at war with itself and experiences a kind of guilty satisfaction. Obviously this is not healthy, and some have suggested it's the cause of serious emotional problems.
3. Finally, truth without good, like faith without charity, is dead. There's simply no life in it. Nor can there be any good unless it is expressed in some orderly form. It would be like light cut off from its source, or something solid without the atomic energy that composes it. So in human life, that is, the life of the mind or spirit, love is nothing without wisdom, and the judgments of wisdom are nothing without love. In fact they really *are NOTHING*. The only qualifier of any judgment is *what kind of love inspires it*.

All that said, let's have a merciful and wise look at the concept of judgment.

First of all, think of the expression, "good judgment." This is what we're talking about. When the Lord said "Judge not, that you be not judged" (Matt. 7:1) He did not mean that we shouldn't observe the difference between right and wrong, only that we shouldn't *condemn* people on that account, since the Lord alone has the wisdom to make that determination. In fact, the Lord plainly said that we *should* judge, but in the words of John 7:24, "not according to the appearance" but justly, that is, with a view to what is good.

Consider the judge in a court of law. His (or her) job is not to condemn but to determine from all the arguments and all the evidence available what is true and what is false. This is the real meaning of judgment (sentencing is something else again). Based on that determination the judge is in a position to administer *justice*, that is, appropriate care, both for the offended *and for the offender* – part of which care is to protect the offender from doing himself even more harm!

But this business of judgment – and discrimination – is not easy. The very fact that these words have such negative connotations speaks to the challenge of doing it right. And yet we are given clear guidance by the Lord in a number of different ways. For example, we read,

"It is a common opinion at this day, that everyone is equally the neighbor, and that benefits are to be conferred on everyone who needs assistance; but it is in the in-

¹ In the field of psychology, cognitive dissonance is the mental discomfort experienced by a person who holds two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values. This discomfort is triggered by a situation in which a person's belief clashes with new evidence perceived by the person (Wikipedia).

terest of Christian prudence to examine well the quality of a person's life, and to exercise charity to him accordingly. The member of the internal church exercises his charity with discrimination, consequently with intelligence; but the member of the external church, because he is not able thus to discern things, does it indiscriminately" (NJHD 85).

OK, we might prefer the word, discernment, to discrimination, but really, what's the difference? The point is that we have to make some kind of judgments. Discrimination does not mean prejudice, it comes from a Latin word that means to make distinctions, to see differences. And that is essential for any kind of clear, rational thinking.

Again, the Lord clearly teaches us that we should do good to *everyone*, both our friends and our enemies, both the evil and the good (Matt. 5:43-47). But doing good to the evil does NOT mean aiding, abetting or in modern terms *enabling* their evil. In THAT sense, the doctrines warn, "doing good to the evil is doing evil to the good." In context in the *Arcana* we read,

"Those governed by external truths know no more than the general truth that good should be done to the poor. They do not know how to tell who are truly the poor, let alone know that in the Word the expression 'the poor' is used to mean those who are so spiritually. Consequently they do good to evil people and to good ones alike, without realizing that doing good to evil people is doing evil to the good, for the evil are then given the opportunity to do evil to those who are good. *This is why people who have this kind of simple zeal are infested so strongly by the crafty and deceitful.* But those governed by internal truths know who the poor are, tell one poor person from another, *and do good to each according to his individual character*" (AC #3820).

Folks, this is discrimination – but discrimination in a very positive sense, and it fits perfectly with what we are taught also about the people of the "ancient church," who had a special kind of insight and integrity in their relationships with one another. The teaching is in the context of an explanation of the spiritual meaning of the Lord's parable about the sheep and the goats (in Matthew 25), where charity toward the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and so on is shown to be critical if a person is to be received into heaven. There we read,

"The doctrinal [wisdom] among the ancients taught all the genera and all the species of charity, and also who the neighbor is toward whom charity is to be exercised, and how one is the neighbor in a different degree and in a different respect from another, and consequently how the exercise of charity varies in its application toward different persons. They also grouped the neighbor together into classes, and assigned them names, calling some the poor, needy, miserable, afflicted; some the blind, lame, halt, and also fatherless and widows; and others the hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, bound, and so on; *thus knowing what duty they owed toward one and toward another*" (AC #4955).

In the next passage we are taught that angels do this, too:

"...for by the 'hungry' they perceive those who from affection desire good; by the 'thirsty,' those who from affection desire truth; by a 'stranger,' those who are

willing to be instructed; by the ‘naked,’ those who acknowledge that there is nothing of good and of truth in themselves; by the ‘sick,’ those who acknowledge that in themselves there is nothing but evil; and by the ‘bound,’ or those who are ‘in prison,’ those who acknowledge that in themselves there is nothing but falsity” (AC #4956).

So here’s another thing our culture tells us NOT to do, that is, under no circumstances are we to “label” people. After all, what do WE know? But the truth is that unless we have some idea of what people’s real needs are we can’t really be useful to them. We just have to be careful.

1. We have to be careful not to impose our own prejudices or pre-conceived notions about what is going on, based on our own limited experience.
2. We have to be careful not to assume people have deliberately chosen a disorderly state or condition, whatever it is, since they might be under compelling influences – past or present – that are in some way out of their control.
3. And we have to be careful not to assume people are opposed to change – if they are approached in the right way.

Judging *ourselves* and our own spiritual states is challenging enough, let alone trying to judge others. But in the end we have no choice. The Lord didn’t say it would be easy; in fact He clearly said that it would NOT be easy. This is why it’s such a problem: we naturally prefer easy.

But let’s turn this whole thing around for a minute and consider how desperate *we* can get when we feel *we* are *not understood*. Since the human mind is the real person, if we don’t know that others appreciate us for who and what we are we can feel terribly lonely, disconnected, and in a way actually invisible. How, then, do we provide that understanding for others? Of course we have to commit some time to the exercise, pay attention, listen well, and make appropriate judgments about what we see and hear. To state the obvious, too, we won’t get there by making statements, we’ll get there by asking questions. So if we want to make good judgments we have to ask good questions – patiently, persistently, calmly and respectfully. Then, too, “playing back” the answers we hear can help us find out if we’re really “getting it” and both parties can make adjustments. Inevitably, then, one thing will lead to another – and another, until a true and mutual understanding is achieved – in which case good, helpful judgments can follow.

Again, is this easy? No. It can be slow, painful and sometimes embarrassing. Furthermore only the Lord can get it absolutely right. – which is why we turn to Him in prayer and reflection for help with the process. But to think we can avoid making judgments about people and things in this world is to make a huge mistake. And, you know, the church can actually be a sort of laboratory for practicing these skills, since we can know – or at least assume – that we are all looking to the Lord together with a view to getting it right. Yes, we’ll make mistakes, but that shouldn’t discourage us. If we keep working at it the Lord can bring good out of anything.

Amen.

Lessons: *Matthew* 7:1-6 & 15-20
Children’s talk on Just Judgment & Commitment to the Lord
Psalms 19:7-14 and *Arcana Caelestia* #2258